A PROCESS
of DISCOVERY

**TEACHERS EXAMINE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES
THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT LEARNING**

"Here's a thought: Could Nika's sloppy paper reflect his anger about how the Native Americans were treated by the pioneers?"

— Group member

By Amy B. Colton and Georgea M. Langer

The collaborative analysis of student learning (Colton, Langer, & Goff, 2015) is a professional learning design that transforms teachers' capacities and commitment to relentlessly pursue and use equitable ways to promote students' learning excellence. Our 30 years of experience and research indicate that when facilitated study groups analyze the work of carefully selected students over a period of months, all students benefit — especially those whose cultures are different from that of their teachers.

Collaborative analysis of student learning accomplishes these outcomes through structured transformative learning — the "process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). These shifts in perspective allow teachers to discover culturally responsive instruction for those students they have struggled to reach and teach.

Here's an example of how a study group using collaborative analysis of student learning helps Sue Baker, a middle school social studies teacher, transform her beliefs about her Native American student, Nika, and ultimately her practice.

Baker: "Nika's writing was improving, but now it is so sloppy."

Group member: "You seem frustrated with Nika's lack of progress."

Baker: "Yes, I am. I don't think he cares anymore about what he turns in. I'm kind of at my wit's end."

Facilitator: "Sue is wondering if Nika just doesn't care. What other explanations might explain why his writing is getting worse?"

[Group members respond. Each idea is explored before going on to the next one.]

Group member: "Here's a thought: Could Nika's sloppy paper reflect his anger about how the Native Americans were treated by the pioneers?"

This new interpretation leads Baker to ask Nika about his family and heritage. Nika describes some of his grandfather's stories about his ancestors' suffering during the westward expansion. Baker realizes she has only presented this time in history from her own white middle-class perspective. These insights prompt her to present a variety of perspectives of historical events.

At the end of a year of studying Nika and the students of her colleagues, Baker reflected: "I learned that I should not assume anything. All students are different, and, as their teacher, I'm responsible for tapping into their lives. … I am now more mindful of my own philosophy, theories, and beliefs because I had to verbalize and reflect on them — and hear the perspectives of my colleagues" (Colton, Langer, & Goff, 2015, p. 289).

A STRUCTURE FOR CHANGE

As Baker's example illustrates, transformative professional learning is particularly critical in contexts in which

teachers' cultural values and beliefs vary from those of their students. Many teachers unconsciously assume their own perspectives are the norm and, therefore, privilege students with similar cultural backgrounds while disadvantaging those whose life experiences are different. Permanent changes in one's thinking and behavior are unlikely to happen unless the deep structures guiding one's behavior are raised to a conscious level and scrutinized for their fit to the present situation (Katz & Dack, 2013; Yero, 2002; Bocchino, 1993).

The collaborative analysis of student learning professional learning design includes two primary features to prompt teachers' examination of their cultural perspectives as they seek responsive approaches for their students: facilitated and structured analysis of student work and communication skills for dialogue.

Here are the features and how they look in action with a study group that is analyzing a work sample from a 1st grader. Through structured inquiry, the group discovers new perspectives that lead to more responsive approaches for both this child and other students who share some of the same learning needs.

FACILITATED STRUCTURES FOR STUDENT WORK ANALYSIS

Groups using collaborative analysis of student learning may consist of same-grade teachers or same-content teachers at any grade level. Teachers meet every other week with a facilitator to learn what helps or hinders individual students' learning and how to respond appropriately. Two primary structures — the inquiry cycle and the five phases of collaborative analysis of student learning — ensure that the months of analyzing student work yield shifts in teachers' cultural views and practices.

THE INQUIRY CYCLE

The inquiry cycle leads teachers to consider multiple explanations for what they observe before deciding how to respond to a student. At every work analysis session, a protocol guides group members to look at student work from various perspectives. Each protocol includes:
- Gathering background information about the student and work sample;
- Sharing observations of what is seen in the work;
- Analyzing from various perspectives possible reasons for the performance; and
- Planning responsive approaches.

After this deep analysis, teachers select the most appropriate plans and put them into action. Then they return to the next study group with a new work sample — evidence of how well the new ideas worked.

The third step, analyzing, is central to transformational professional learning. Typically, teachers identify a problem and then immediately share strategies for fixing it. But this approach misses an important piece of the puzzle: the cause of the specific problem. Without knowing why the student is performing as

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THE 5 PHASES OF COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT LEARNING

1. **Establish a focus for collaborative inquiry.** What area of the curriculum is most challenging for our students?

2. **Define teachers' professional learning goals.** Which students would be most fruitful to study over time so that we may discover equitable responses?

3. **Inquire into teaching for learning** (three to five months). Which approaches are most responsive to our students' specific strengths and needs?

4. **Assess learning progress.** What progress have our students made? Who needs further assistance?

5. **Integrate learning into teachers' professional practice.** What have we learned about ourselves and our teaching, and what might we need to learn more about?

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he or she is, teachers cannot devise the strategies that will be culturally responsive to those causes.

Imagine that a group observes that a student's writing lacks expressive language. If, before sharing strategies, the teachers pause to analyze multiple reasons for the observed performance, they might discover two very different reasons: The student lacks a wide vocabulary, or the student doesn't understand the concept of supporting detail. Note how each explanation calls for a very different teaching strategy.

After Sue Baker's study group engaged in the analyzing step of the inquiry cycle, Baker transformed her perspective. She moved from seeing Nika's "sloppy work" as evidence that he didn't care to realizing that his cultural background was influencing his performance.

THE FIVE PHASES

Groups using collaborative analysis of student learning engage in five phases (see box above). A facilitator guides teachers through each phase.

The firsts two phases occur in the fall (or early in the semester) and set the stage for the third phase, which is the heart of collaborative analysis of student learning — the analysis of each teacher's focus student's work over time. For this phase to reap the greatest benefits, both the content and the characteristics of the specific students studied must be selected mindfully.

To illustrate the phases in action, consider a group that is investigating 1st graders' reading fluency. In phase one, teachers design and administer an initial assessment — a modified running record — to determine their students' current performance. At the next session (phase two), each teacher records

next to each student's name detailed information about the performance and what is known about each student.

Lila Green, a study group member, first notices a cluster of students who all share a similar content challenge: They don't use word attack strategies when faced with unknown words. They either skip the word or substitute ones that don't make sense. She has seen this challenge before and is curious to find ways to improve this skill.

Green looks for common characteristics of students who are not reaching proficiency. She notes that several of them appear to have little economic or parental support at home. Because Green grew up with a mother who regularly volunteered in her school, Green finds herself often frustrated with students whose skills are low and whose parents don't support their learning.

At the end of this phase, each teacher has used the observed patterns and knowledge of herself to select a professional learning goal and focus student. Green wrote, "I selected Dana to help improve my ability to reach low-income 1st graders who have little support at home and who use few word attack skills when they are stumped by a word."

In phase three, teachers spend three to five months studying each focus student's consecutive work samples. The next section includes an example of how Green's group considered Dana's culture, family, strengths, and needs along with Green's own cultural background and actions. The group refers to these understandings as they design the approaches Green will use before bringing the next work sample to the group.

The study group members complete the last two phases in the spring or at the end of the semester. They assess and analyze their whole class's learning progress and make a plan for students not reaching proficiency. In the last phase, teachers reflect on what they have learned about themselves and their teaching and set their professional learning goals.

We're often asked how spending so much time on a small number of focus students can benefit other students. Because each focus student is selected from a group of students who share common content challenges and whose backgrounds are puzzling to teachers, the insights gained usually can be transferred to other, similar students. Further, since every group member selects a different focus student, the teachers learn about those students' needs and strengths.

If teachers are to share their less successful work samples, a culture of trust and openness is crucial. The group learns specific communication skills to maintain safety and engage in the deep analysis of student learning.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Productive dialogue slows the decision-making process so teachers can "expand their thinking by suspending judgment and by taking time to inquire into their own perspectives and those of their colleagues" (Colton, Langer, & Goff, 2015, p. 56).

Since this type of dialogue doesn't necessarily come natu-

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Engage in committed listening.

- *Attend fully:* Suspend judgment, note verbal and nonverbal cues.
- *Pause:* Understand what was said, resist interrupting, allow speaker to elaborate.

Communicate interest and understanding.

- *Paraphrase:* Value and clarify what was said.

Encourage deeper levels of analysis and reflection.

- *Probe for clarity:* Gain information unintentionally left out.
- *Empowering probe:* Assume that speaker has already considered the question or issue being raised.
- *Probe for beliefs and feelings:* Reflect on and examine accuracy of beliefs that may limit ability to reach a student.

Put ideas on the table.

- Offer ideas in an inviting way, using tentative language. Refrain from trying to persuade or convince others.

rally, a facilitator — a person from outside the group who is more skilled than any of the group members — teaches, models, and coaches teachers' use of the skills (see box above). As teachers demonstrate their fluency with these skills, the facilitator intervenes only when the group might be overlooking an important learning opportunity.

Here is a glimpse into Green's study group's interactions as they examine Dana's successive work samples. Note how the following dialogue transforms Green's perspective and guides her to discover responsive approaches to Dana's needs. (The communication skills used are indicated in parentheses.)

When the group analyzed Dana's first reading sample (running record), they observed many miscues. Green also shared

that Dana demonstrated high levels of discomfort when she read. As the group entertained multiple explanations for those observations, they theorized that Dana's anxiety was interfering with her ability to catch her errors. So they identified several word attack strategies (e.g. use picture clues, sound out the word) that they believed might help build her confidence.

Three weeks later, Green brought Dana's next running record to the group. Green reported, "I can't believe I've seen very little improvement. I thought her anxiety was the issue. She still seems really uncomfortable reading aloud."

As the group proceeded to the analyzing step, one teacher prompted Green to consider how she thinks about Dana's mother.

Group member: "I'm looking at Dana's biography for clues to this mystery. You mentioned that you selected Dana partly because she has little economic or parental support at home. What impact might that have on Dana's lack of progress in reading?" *(Empowering probe)*

Green: "I really don't think the mother has much interest in helping Dana. She didn't even come to parent conferences. I called her to reschedule, and she didn't return my call. How can I do anything when the mother doesn't even care?"

Facilitator: "So you think Dana's lack of progress is because her mother isn't helping her at home, and, without her support, Dana's reading won't improve *(Paraphrase)*. What leads you to that assumption?" *(Probe for beliefs)*

Green: "The research is quite clear. Students need to read at home if they are to be successful. Her mother isn't spending any time with her, so what can I do?"

Group member: "I'd like to offer a different perspective *(Put ideas on the table)*. I believe you said earlier that Dana's mother is single. Perhaps she works and doesn't have time to read to Dana."

Green: "Yes, Dana has talked about going to her aunt's house after school because her mother works long hours. Now that you mention it, I believe the father is not providing any support. Wow. I must admit that I had assumed that the mother doesn't care about reading. But now I wonder if the mother is just too stressed or tired to sit and read with Dana. I guess I assumed that every parent should and could support their child's learning at home. Now I can't even imagine how hard it must be for Dana's mother to come home and try to read with Dana. I may have to create other means for Dana to practice reading aloud."

Another group member: "Here's another possible explanation. Perhaps the mom reads with Dana but doesn't know how to help Dana when she struggles." *(Put ideas on the table)*

> **"I really don't think the mother has much interest in helping Dana. She didn't even come to parent conferences. I called her to reschedule, and she didn't return my call. How can I do anything when the mother doesn't even care?"**
>
> — *Group member*

Green: "You know, I never considered that. I really need to find a way to meet with the mother so I can check out these different possibilities. I'm going to find out more before I decide how to help Dana in class."

The use of the communication skills helped these teachers dig deeply into various explanations for the performance they saw. Green left with more questions to be pursued before she could design the most responsive approaches for Dana.

When Green met with the mother, the mother told Green, "Even after my long day at work, I take time to read with Dana. But she struggles so much that we both get frustrated. I just don't know what to do." Green asked the mother about Dana's play partners and learned that she has a good friend around 11 years old. As Green reflected on this conversation, she recalled that one group member had used reading buddies to help students improve their reading aloud. Green sought out the 5th-grade teacher and asked if Dana's friend could be her reading buddy. Soon Green noted that Dana was making steady progress in her word attack skills. Even the mother noticed less frustration and more enjoyment when reading at home with Dana.

Given adequate time, space, and support, teachers like Green can transform their understanding of their students, their teaching, and themselves. After her months of collaboratively analyzing Dana's work, Green said, "I learned to always check my cultural lenses before making assumptions about others who are living a very different life from my own" (Colton, Langer, & Goff, 2015, p. 242). Doing so makes a world of difference when pursuing responsive equitable approaches to promote students' learning excellence.

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